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AUTHOR Kahn, Lisa
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ABSTRACT

The use of informal group settings such as kaffeekranzchen for the maintenance of German language and culture among adult speakers is reported. Regular bimonthly kaffeekranzchen were held by a native German speaker at the suggestion of several German-Texan women, ranging in age from 40 to 79, who were interested in polishing and maintaining their German language skills. The nine rural participants spoke a slightly antiquated but comprehensible form of German. The meetings were unstructured but required that German be used for all conversation. Following an informal beginning, more structured activities such as discussion of old books and letters, holidays, and songs have been introduced. Similar groups have been organized in other Texas cities. Suggestions are made for organizing such groups and for attracting younger German American participants. Universities can expand their adult enrollment by fulfilling the need for informal language maintenance programs among ethnic Americans. (RW)

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Culture and Language Maintenance Through the Kaffeekränzchen

Lisa Kahn.

In the U.S., the teaching of Foreign Languages and Foreign Cultures, until very recently, has been largely restricted to secondary school and college levels. While some attempts were made to extend the foreign language instruction to experiment with junior high and elementary school students, there were no extensions in the other direction, namely to reactivate adults who already spoke German. Foreign Language Departments have, traditionally, not contributed to the language maintenance interests which are present among American bilinguals of their native language. Professor Guadelupe Valdés from the State University of New Mexico in Las Cruces started an experiment in Mesilla, a small Spanish town about 20 miles south of Las Cruces, to teach Spanish language and culture to those in the community of Mesilla who were interested in keeping their language and traditions. These classes were very successful and have been conducted continuously since their inception in 1979.

I was not aware of Professor Valdés' pioneering work, when in the fall of 1980 at the annual meeting of the German Texan Heritage Society in San Antonio, I was approached by a couple of ladies who live in a small town in Texas, whether I had ever considered German get-togethers on a regular basis, and if so, could we not form a small group for the purpose of doing just that.

At this point, I must explain, that I have a small what the German-Texans call "Platz" about 18 miles from the small town where these women live. Well, it sounded like a good idea to me that, whenever I would be in the country and not too busy with other chores, we could meet and speak German.

Our first meeting took place in January of 1981. The women came to my farm, we had coffee and cake and talked German only. Both women are of German descent as are so many of the rural population in this part of Texas where the map is dotted with names such as Schulenburg, Neu Braunfels, New Ulm, Weimar, Boerne, Bastrop, even Valhalla. Interestingly enough, some of the oldest German

settlements have English names such as Industry and Giddings, or French names like LaGrange and Rutersville. Soon, these two women brought friends along who were interested in keeping their German. It was decided that we could meet on a regular schedule, bimonthly, afternoons. Soon we were 9, ranging in age from 40 to 79, all of them speaking German well, but a German which would sound somewhat antiquated to a contemporary visitor from Germany, though, because it is no dialect, can easily be understood by anyone speaking standard German. One of the reasons, as a matter of fact, why they were attracted to me, was, I believe, that I was just such a newcomer from Germany and had no problems understanding them. On the contrary, I have always been amazed at how well they kept their language over several generations, and I have told them so, which, no doubt, made them feel quite proud. Of course, there is some bleed-through, some calques occur, but on the whole it is amazing how well their German is preserved.

Despite their age differences within the group, there was close adhesiveness due to the more or less identical rural upbringing in families of German descent. They shared the same interests, spoke the same language, came from the same social milieu - middle and upper-middle class - because the Germans in this area of Texas are hardworking, thrifty and enjoy upward mobility. They knew that I teach at Texas Southern University, but it was and has been irrelevant for them and for our meetings. They approached me as a private individual, believing that my enthusiasm for teaching as well as for preserving and strengthening German would be matched by my accessibility in this remote area where German teachers are hard to come by, and by my willingness to engage in informal, unstructured and activity-oriented instruction.

These then, were the two main ingredients for the success of the novel German program: a. the group's motivation and ability, and b. the teacher's willingness to experiment with unstructured activities in a non-threatening setting. At this time I knew very little or nothing about strategies for

approaching communities of German-Texans, and so it was only natural that I applied for an NEH summer workshop grant which was conducted by Guadelupe Valdés at the State University of New Mexico in June of this year.

The workshop was designed to encourage individuals who were teaching at the college level and had access to communities of "native" speakers, to become actively involved in language maintenance activities. For this purpose it involved:

a. the presentation of a working model strategy, namely the one in Mesilla, N.M., for Spanish speakers;
b. discussion of the various outreach programs in which the NEH participants had been instrumental; and
c. projections for implementation of future non-credit adult activities in the respective ethnic communities.

After the NEH workshop I went to Germany, and when I returned for the beginning of the fall semester I was not sure at all if "my" group would come back. I was even afraid that the Kaffeekränzchen had dissolved. Fortunately, this was not so. As a matter of fact, the group seemed to be very eager to get going again. We decided again on bi-monthly meetings, and I planned to structure them a little more. Of course, we always start out with a little Kaffeeklatsch, which seems to fill a need for these women to talk in German about the happenings of the previous two weeks, to talk about the cakes and cookies which they bring along, exchange recipes, etc. Among the more structural activities we had one slide-presentation of a member who was in Germany and took the slides there, one session where we looked at old books - which they brought - in German script, and several of the women could read from them, one session where everyone brought a song or nursery rhyme, several sessions where we read and discussed letters which they had received from Germany as well as letters

they wanted to write to family and friends there, one session where we talked about the holidays during the fall, e.g. the insignificance of the Erntedankfest in Germany vs. Thanksgiving in the U.S., we discussed the Oktoberfest, the St. Martin's Tag as well as Nikolaustag, the Advent season, and the Christmas customs in various parts of Germany. This was a new occasion to talk about different baked goods, Lebkuchen, the symbolic meaning of Stolle, the customary drinks in winter such as Grogg and Glühwein, I brought a "sächsische Pyramide", various carved angels and "erzgebirgische Räuchermännchen" and "Kurrendesänger." Of course, we had a "Weihnachtsfeier", and I must confess, I got almost hoarse from so much singing, for we sang not just 3 stanzas of "Stille Nacht" und 3 stanzas of "O du fröhliche", but also 3 stanzas of "Es ist ein Ros entsprungen", of "O Tannenbaum", at least 6 or 7 of "Vom Himmel hoch, da komm ich her", and several of "Kommet ihr Hirten", "Ihr Kinderlein kommet", "der Christbaum ist der schönste Baum", "Alle Jahre wieder", "Kling Glöckchen", "Süsser die Glocken nie klingen" and "Morgen kommt der Weihnachtsmann". Most of the women knew the first stanza. I had texts for the other stanzas, and they insisted on singing them all. Their joy in singing was really something to behold, because it was not for religious reasons that they were so interested in the singing. Historically, churches have not played an important role in this particular area, as well as in other German enclaves in Texas. Often, religious preference is hardly discernible, though many of them are Lutheran.

Germans in the U.S. have assimilated very easily, because they blend fairly well into the American main-stream. In their physical and cultural characteristics they are closer to Anglo norms than most other minorities. Indistinguishable in appearance and of mostly Protestant heritage, they spoke a language closely related to English. In a way, it is astonishing that some of these Germans-Texans did not totally assimilate but did keep their language. Yet, what two wars could not do, the two phenomena

a. the disintegration of family life, and

b. television

have managed to accomplish, the disappearance of German among the younger German/Texans, and by younger I mean under forty. Therefore, unless decisive measure are taken very soon to prevent the disintegration of these German communities and to stop the language disappearance soon, there will be no more German speaking Germans in Texas in another ten to twenty years. Some of these younger people have a latent knowledge of German, which could be activated fairly rapidly others know only a few expressions. None of them write German. It is not that their attitude towards the German language and culture is negative, because there is no social stigma attached to speaking or being German, at least not anymore. They just have neither practical nor emotional need for it. It has been estimated that there are still 70,000 Texans who can communicate in German, but this number is dwindling daily as the old active speakers die. There are few households where more than one generation lives together, in other words, the actively speaking and speech-activating, custom-preserving, story-telling grandmother has no longer the intimate day-to-day contact with her grandchildren.

While I have mainly spoken about German-Texans, I am inclined to believe that the situation is identical or similar in other states with German population. If we do want to preserve ethnic cultures and ethnic languages, we cannot wait much longer, and, it seems to me that universities would have a new source of students if they were willing

a. to go out to where these "students" are, and

b. meet the needs of this new clientele.

Obviously, their needs are not grades nor credit. Therefore, a classroom situation may not be the most conducive foreign language set-up for such an adult group which is fairly fluent in German, though their German is somewhat

fossilized. The Kaffeestunde seems to have worked out extremely well with my group; of course, it is not just a "Stunde", but an entire afternoon. Summers we met from 3 - 6, winters from 2 - 5, because several come a distance of 20 miles, and don't like to drive home alone in the dark.

Such a group does not need an instructor who is an expert in linguistics, literature, methodology, but rather a host or hostess who is a fluent German speaker, or he will be out-put by these ethnic speakers, of whom several spoke German before they learned English. The leader or hostess must have a high tolerance level for language usage which is sometimes archaic according to contemporary German standards, but especially he or she must be able to radiate enthusiasm for things German. For almost 2 generations, namely during WW I and WW II, these Germans often went, figuratively speaking, into hiding, denying their culture. There were times when they were openly discriminated against; they are very eager now to show their pride again in their German heritage, except that the younger generation has forgotten their German, or never even picked it up.

My own future plans for this and other groups are as follows:

a. to find a substitute teacher-hostess for the existing group, because I will not be in Texas during the coming semester;

b. to try to organize similar groups in Houston and other cities. One was started in Austin, another one in San Antonio. A list which I passed around to members of the GTHS, asking those to sign who would be interested in German "classes", resulted in more than thirty addresses. And, of course, as in my rural Round Top group, these classes grow by word of mouth; and

c. to try and attract younger people to form similar German groups. This will be the most difficult task, since they are too busy. Naturally, they would not be interested in any kind of Kaffeekränzchen. I had envisioned either a singing group which would

also include country-western music, or a Bastelgruppe, in which they would do woodwork, crafts, perhaps even drawing and painting, but speak all the time German. I would hesitate to recommend this format to anybody who has not a native knowledge of German and a high threshold of error tolerance.[a]

Such an activity group seems to be the only way they could be enticed to meet, because - in contrast to the older women in the Kaffestunde - these kids have no emotional needs for German culture. Perhaps, one should be satisfied, as has been suggested to me, if one or two of the grandchildren of these women decide to take German at college. As a matter of fact, the names of two young people were given to me who did start German classes at the University of Texas in Austin, because of their grandmother's new involvement with the GTHS.

So while the branching out in other areas - Houston, Austin, San Antonio - seems to work, the branching out age-wise has yet to occur. It will be the most difficult goal to achieve, but also a very important one. It will need patience, skill, enthusiasm.

My present Kaffeeklatsch group has progressed to the point where I now feel free to correct individual members when they make mistakes. However, I leave it up to them, whether they want to correct themselves. Though we have shunned the "class" appearance, I see our meetings as productive learning processes. The social setting in which the learning occurs adds to the enjoyment of the entire group and thus facilitates learning. Conversation is still our main activity, but each time, a period has been set aside for reading - German script, songs, riddles, jokes, and puzzles, recipes, and especially letters.

Universities which are hard pressed for new enrollment numbers might try to approach ethnic Germans in their region. In some areas this is an as yet untapped source of new "students" in adult education. And in addition to

playing the numbers game successfully, there is the inner satisfaction of keeping German alive. Last, as a bonus, so to speak, there may be the possibility of getting young "regular" students motivated to take German. It seems a worthwhile endeavor to me.

Lisa Kahn

Texas Southern University